

San Diego County Beach Closures and Advisories in 2002

Summary and Comparison to Previous Years

In 2002, San Diego County experienced 1297 beach closure and advisory days as a result of reported water contamination events¹. In addition to the 1297 beach closure and advisory days, the county as a whole also experienced 35 days when all coastal waters were under a General Advisory due to urban runoff impacting beaches after rainfall.

Yearly totals for water quality Closure events and the duration of these events, or number of days signs were posted at a beach, dropped from 2001. Yearly totals for water quality Advisory events also dropped from the previous year. However, the duration of Advisory events rose slightly from 2001. Although monitoring frequencies for all beaches in San Diego County were very similar to 2001, the County of San Diego Department of Environmental Health (DEH) increased the consistency in its discretionary use of the 30 day geometric mean standard for bacterial levels in monitoring which resulted in longer running Advisories to better protect public health.

Several research projects were started or developed in 2002 that will enable the DEH to make better decisions regarding beach water quality and the protection of public health in the future. In Mission Bay, the projects include: the Mission Bay Bacterial Source Identification Study, Contaminant Dispersion Study, and a Human Pathogen and Epidemiology study. Two projects are targeting south county beaches, the South Bay Coastal Ocean Observation System and Remote Sensing Project. In addition, all coastal municipalities conducted year round monitoring to quantify amounts of contamination in coastal storm drain outlets.

Beach Closures

A "Closure" is the placement of signs at a public beach that informs the public that the area is closed to swimming and/or water contact due to water contamination and is posted with orange or yellow warning signs reading *"Contaminated Water - Keep Out"*. A beach closure is a consequence of a reported sewage spill that impacts, or may impact, water quality at a recreational beach. Sewage contaminated water poses the greatest health risk to ocean users.

Beach Advisories / Warnings

An advisory or warning is the placement of signs at a public beach that warns the public against swimming and/or water contact due to the increased risk of illness. An advisory/ warning is a consequence of bacteria levels in monitoring results exceeding State standards. White warning signs reading *"Warning - Contact With This Water May Cause Illness. Bacteria Levels Exceed Health Standards"* indicate an advisory/ warning. The source of the bacteria is usually unknown, but may include domestic pet, wildlife, bird, or human feces, soils, or decaying plant matter. Another situation in which a beach is under advisory is during the excavation of a river mouth or lagoon opening when potentially contaminated water is released into the ocean.

General Advisory

The DEH issues a 72 hour General Advisory for all coastal waters due to ocean and bay water contamination by urban runoff after 0.2 inches or more of rain. A General Advisory is listed on the County web page (www.sdcounty.ca.gov "Beach & Bay Status Report"), DEH phone message (619.338.2073), Earth 911 web page (www.california.earth911.org "Beach Water Quality"), and in the San Diego Union Tribune weather page. When rainfall washes pollutants off streets and urban areas, urban runoff is carried to beaches via storm drain, river, and lagoon outlets where it contaminates ocean waters. Swimming near these outlets has been correlated to an increased risk of illness among ocean users.

¹ The 1297 closure and advisory day total does not include beaches posted under a chronic status due to on-going sources of contamination. Chronic locations included the Tijuana Slough National Wildlife Refuge shoreline and Border Field State Park, and the Children's Pool in La Jolla. Although monitoring results at these beaches was occasionally within State standards, the presence of a known source of contamination, i.e., a sewage contaminated river and seals, respectively, require these areas to be posted as a precaution.